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IF WINTER DON'T

~~A.B.C.D.E.F.~~
~~NOTSOMUCHINSON~~

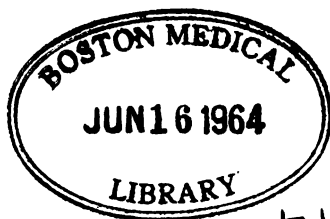
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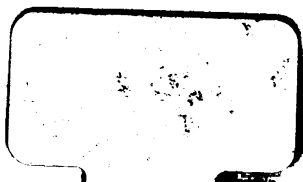
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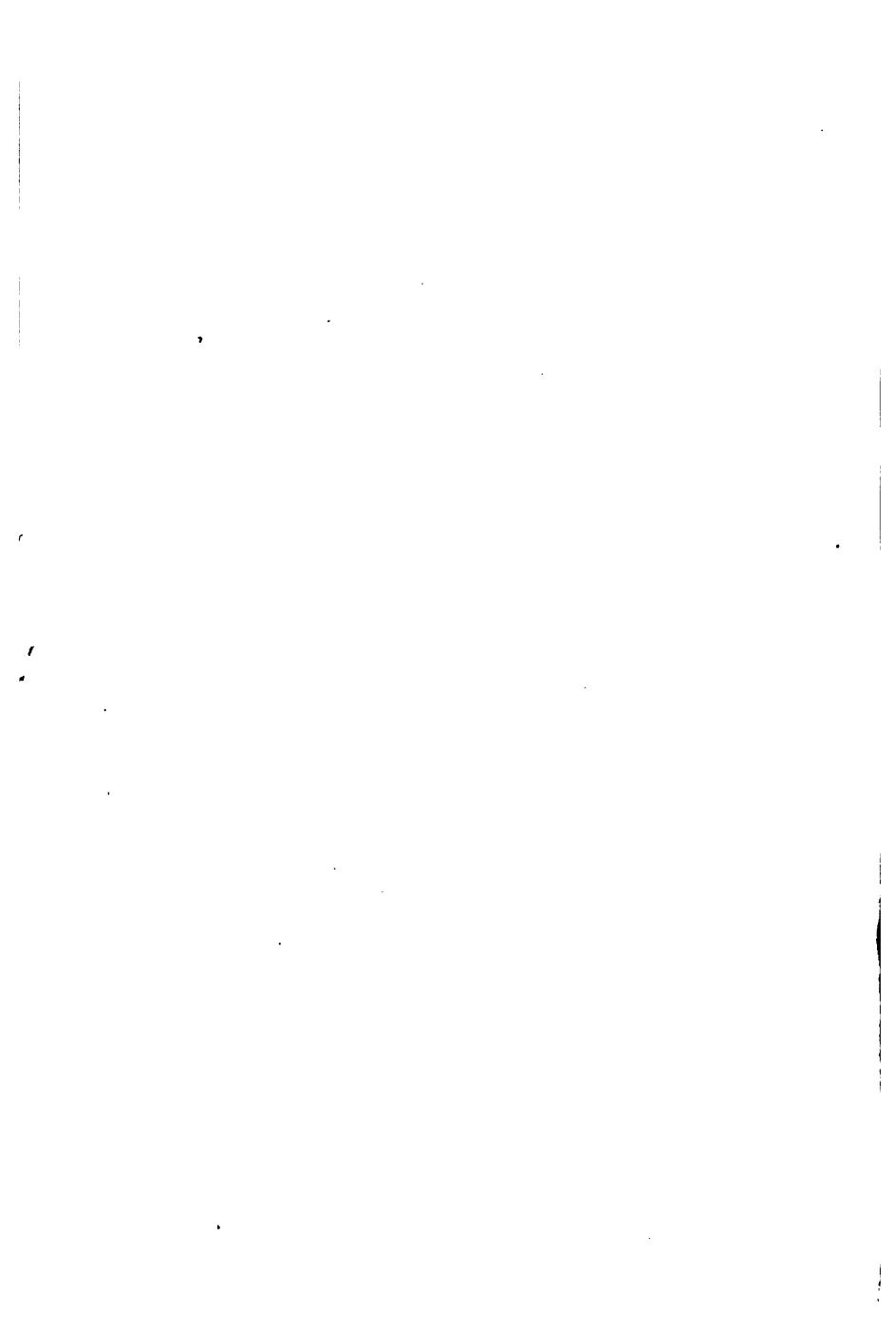
BARRY
PAIN



t.4128



To Jerry
from Wilna, 1922



IF WINTER DON'T

~~A B C D E F~~
~~NOT SO MUCH IN SON~~

BY
BARRY PAIN



NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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*These parodies do good to the book
parodied; great good, sometimes; they
are kindly meant, and the parodist has
usually keenly enjoyed the book of which
he sits down to make a fool.*

R. L. STEVENSON.



PREFATORY NOTE

I

"IF WINTER COMES" placed its author not only as a Best Seller, but as one of the Great Novelists of to-day. Not always are those royalties crowned by those laurels. Tarzan (of, if I remember rightly, the Apes) never won the double event. And I am told by superior people that, intellectually, Miss Ethel M. Dell takes the hindmost. Personally, I found "If Winter Comes" a most sympathetic and interesting book. I think there are only two points on which I should be disposed to quarrel with it. Firstly, though Nona is a real creation, Effie is an incredible piece of novelist's machinery. Secondly, I detest the utilization of the Great War at the present day for the purposes of fiction. It is altogether too easy. It buys the emotional situation ready-made. It asks the reader's memory to supplement the writer's imagination. And this is not my sole objection to its use.

II

I wonder if I might, without being thought blasphemous, say a word or two about the Great Novelists of to-day. They have certain points of resemblance. I do not think that over-states it.

PREFACE

They have the same little ways. They divide their chapters into sections, and number the sections in plain figures. This is quite pontifical, and lends your story the majesty of an Act of Parliament. The first man who did it was a genius. And the other seven hundred and eighteen showed judgment. I propose to use it myself when I remember it.

Then there is the three-dot trick. At one time those dots indicated an omission. To-day, some of our best use them as an equivalent of the cinema fade-out. Those dots prolong the effect of a word or sentence; they lend it an afterglow. You see what I mean? Afterglow . . .

One must mention, too, the staccato style—the style that makes the printer send the boy out for another hundred gross of full-stops. All the Great Novelists of to-day use it, more or less.

III

Let us see what can be done with it. Here, for instance, is a sentence which was taught me in the nursery, for its alleged tongue-twisting quality: "She stood at the door of Burgess's fish-sauce shop, Strand, welcoming him in." In that form it is not impressive, but now note what one of these staccato merchants might make of it.

"Across the roaring Strand red and green lights spelling on the gloom. 'BURGESS'S FISH-SAU.' A moment's darkness and again 'BURGESS'S FISH-

SAU.' Like that. Truncated. The final —CE not functioning. He had to look though it hurt him. Hurt horrible. Damnably. And his eyes traveled downward.

"Suddenly and beyond hope she! Isobel-at-the-last. Standing in the doorway. White on black. Slim. Willowy. Incomparable. Incommensurable. She saw him and her lips rounded to a call. He sensed it through the traffic. Come in. Calling and calling. Come in.

"Come in. . . .

"Out of the rain."

It is like a plaintive hymn sung to a banjo accompaniment.

Incidentally it illustrates another favorite trick of these gentlemen—the introduction of a commonplace or even jarring detail into a romantic scene in order to increase its appearance of reality. It is quite a good trick.

IV

And sometimes, not every day but sometimes, one gets a little weary even of the best tricks. Need the author depend quite so much on the printer for his effects? Scenes and passages in a book seem to be standing very near the edge, and the wanton thought occurs to one that a little shove would send them over. In fact, one gets irritable. And then anything bad may happen. This parody for instance.



IF WINTER DON'T

CHAPTER I

LUKE SHARPER. Age, thirty-four. Married, but not much. Private residence, Jawbones, Halfpenny Hole, Surrey. Favorite recreation, suffering. Favorite flower——

Oh, drop it! Let us rather listen to Mr. Alfred Jingle, solicitor, talking to his artist friend.

“Met Sharper yesterday. Remember him at the old school? Flap Sharper we called him. Not that they really did flap. His ears, I mean. They just crept up and bent over when he was thinking hard. People came to see it. Came from miles around.

“Rum chap. Rum ways. Never agreed with anybody present, including himself. Always inventing circumstantial evidence to convict himself of crimes he had never committed. Remember the window? Half-brick came flying through it. Old Borkins looked out. Below stood Flap Sharper with the other half-brick in his hand. Arm drawn back. No other boy in sight. The two halves fitted exactly. It certainly looked like it.

Poor old Flap found that it felt like it, too. But he had never chucked that half-brick. Ogilvie did it. Remember him? The one we called Pink-eye. Have a drink?

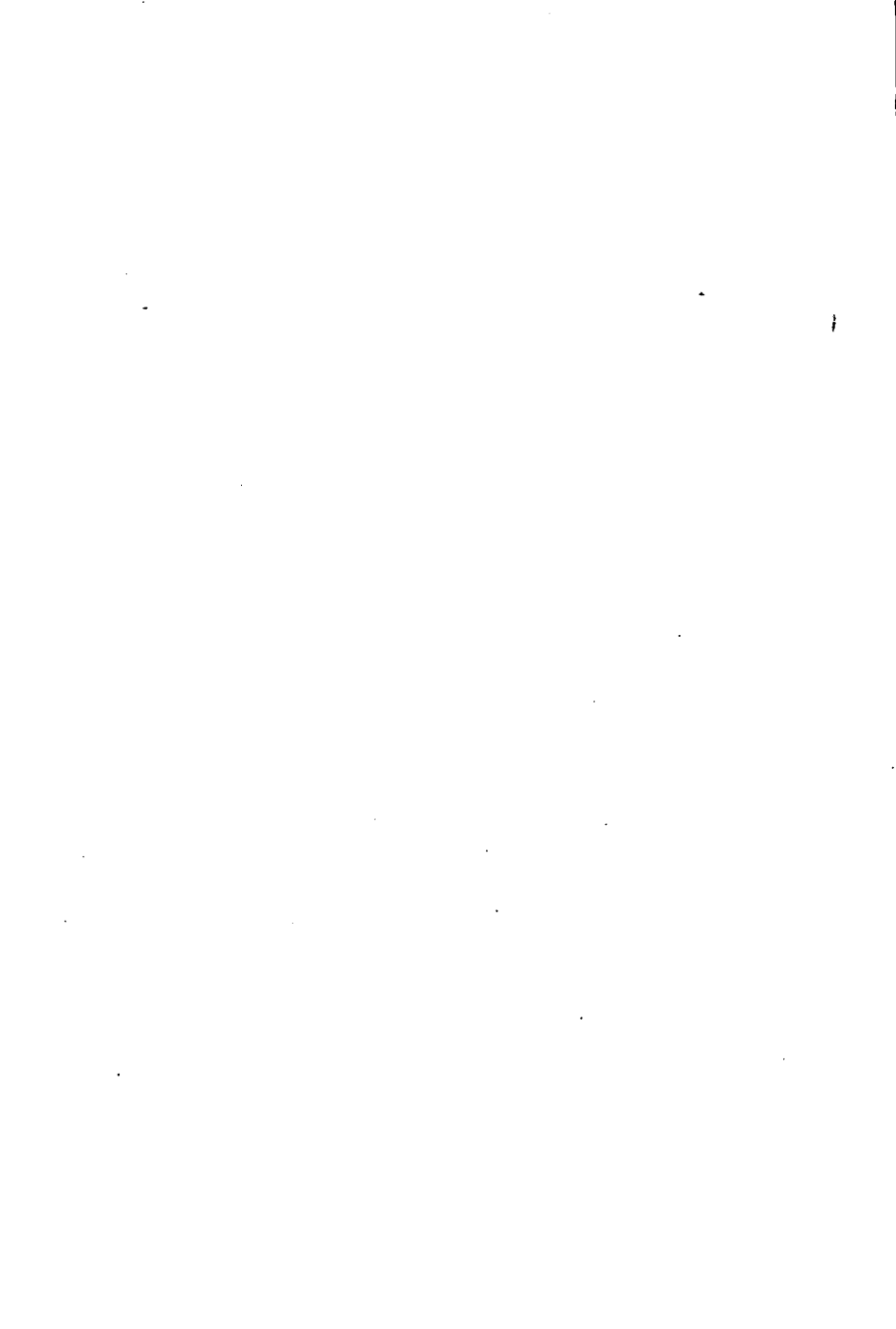
"I offered Sharper my sympathy. Wouldn't have it. Said 'Why?' Maintained that we had all got to suffer in this life, and it was better to begin early. Excellent practice. Then his ears crept up and bent over. Got it again later in the day for drawing a caricature of old Borkins. Never did it, of course. Couldn't draw. Can't remember who did it. Oh, you did, did you? Like you. Have another?

"Yes, we have a certain amount of business in Dilborough. I'm generally down there once or twice a year. I walk over to Halfpenny Hole and lunch with Sharper. It's a seven mile walk. But lunch at the hotel is seven-and-six. Doing uncommonly well, is Sharper. He's in Pentlove, Postlethwaite and Sharper. You know. The only jams that really matter. Pickles, too. Chutney. Very hot stuff. Oh, yes, Sharper's all right.

"You ought to run down and see Halfpenny Hole. What is it the agents say? Old-world. It's very old-world. Only three houses in it, and all different. Whether the garden settlement will spoil it or not is another matter. You go and paint it before it gets spoilt.

"Strictly between ourselves, I am not quite sure that Sharper and his wife hit it off. Oh, nothing much. It's just that when he speaks to her she never answers, and when she speaks to him he never answers. In fact,

if she speaks at all he groans and moves his ears. Charming woman, very. Quite pretty. There may be nothing in it. I saw no actual violence. Sharper may merely have been suffering. He wouldn't be happy if he wasn't. Have a drink. No?"



CHAPTER II

HALFPENNY HOLE lay in the bottom of a slope seven miles from Dilborough. Dilborough was almost the same distance from Halfpenny Hole. Jawbones was, I think we must say, an old-world house, and had the date 1623 carved over the doorway. Luke Sharper had carved it himself. A little further down the road there was—there's no other word for it—an old-world bridge with—I'm afraid we must have it once more—an old-world stream running underneath it. It gave one the impression that it had always been like that. Always the stream under the bridge. Never the bridge under the stream. But now that the Garden Settlement had come things might be very different. Houses were going up; Mr. Doom Dagshaw's Mammoth Circus was going up; even the rates were going up.

At the end of his honeymoon Luke Sharper went to see a man about a dog, and left his wife to prepare Jawbones for his accommodation. She was a good housekeeper, and Luke acknowledged it. Whenever he thought about her at all, he always added "but she is a good housekeeper." He was desperately fair.

"This," said Mabel, opening a door, as Luke began his visit of inspection, "this is your den."

Luke's ears moved. He kissed her twice. "But, you know, I cannot bear it. There are some words which I am unable to endure, such as salt-cellar, tuberculosis, tennis-net and den."

"Very well," said Mabel, a little coldly, "we'll call it your cage. And just look. There is a pair of my father's old slippers that I have brought for you. Size thirteen. You've got none quite like that, have you?"

He put one arm round her waist.

"Where did you say the dustbin was?" he asked.

"But," she said amazed, "you don't mean to say— Surely you wear slippers?"

"I never was," he replied firmly. Nor did he.

"And now," said Mabel, "come into the kitchen and see the two maids that I have engaged. Two nice respectable sisters named Morse—Ellen Morse and——"

"There isn't an 'l' in Morse," he said gloomily.

"And Kate Morse," Mabel continued.

She opened the door into the spotless kitchen, and the two maids sprang instantly to attention. One of them was cleaning silver, the other was still lingering over tea. The first was very long, and the second very short.

Luke slapped his leg enthusiastically. "Oh, by Jove," he said, "this is ripping. Morse. Don't you see? Dot and Dash. Dot and Dash."

He howled with laughter. Dash dropped the tea-pot. Dot had hysterics.

"I think," said Mabel, without a smile, "we had better go into the garden."

Everything in the garden was lovely.

"Luke," said Mabel, "I did not quite like what you said in the kitchen just now. It was just a teeny-weeny——"

"Funny, wasn't it?" said Luke. "You must admit it was funny. Seemed to come to me all of a flash. I'll bet that nothing more amusing has been said in this house since the day it was built. Dot and Dash! Dot and Dash! Oh, help!"

He rolled about the path in uncontrollable laughter.

Mabel looked sadder and sadder. He said that made it all the funnier, and laughed more.

After dinner he wrote the joke out carefully. It seemed a pity that *Punch* should not have it. Mabel yawned, and said she would go up to bed.

"Tired?" asked Luke.

"A little. There's something about you, Luke, that makes one feel tired. By the way, did you ever know Mr. Mark Sabre?"

"God forbid—I mean, no."

"Well, he called one of his maids High Jinks and the other Low, but it turned out later in the story that the one that was first Low became High, while High became Low. I thought I'd just mention it to you as a warning."

"Right-o. I'll be very careful. I may as well come

up to bed myself. The editor of *Punch* will be a happy man to-morrow morning."

At intervals that night Mabel was awakened by screams of laughter. Once she enquired what the cause was.

"Dot and Dash," he replied, chuckling. "Too good for words! Oh, can't you see it?"

"Good-night again," said Mabel.

On the following night, when he returned from business, Mabel met him in the hall.

"Darling," she said, "we've had trouble with the sink in the scullery."

"What did you do about it?"

"I sent for the plumber. He seemed such a nice, intelligent man."

"Have you kept him to dine with us?"

"No. Why on earth should I? He had a glass of beer in the kitchen."

"People dine with me sometimes," said Luke, "who are neither nice nor intelligent. Oh, can't you see, Mabel, that we are all equal in the sight of Heaven?"

"Yes," said Mabel, "but you're not in sight of Heaven—not by a long way. I don't suppose you ever will be. Besides, if he had stayed, the dinner could not have gone on."

Luke's ears twitched convulsively. "I can't see that," he said. "It is unthinkable. How can you say that?"

"Well," said Mabel, "one of the vegetables we are

to eat to-night happens to be leeks. And, of course, he, being a plumber, would have stopped them."

Luke did not swear. He simply went up to his bedroom in silence. There he began ticking certain subjects off on his finger. Number One, Den. Number Two, Slippers. Number Three, Dot and Dash. Number Four, Plumber. She would never see. She would never understand. And he was married to it. He put up both hands and pushed his ears back into position.

(I had fully intended to divide this chapter into sections and to number them in plain figures. Careless of me. Thoughtless. Have a shot at it in the next chapter? I think so. Yes, almost . . .)



CHAPTER III

I

PENTLOVE, POSTLETHWAITE AND SHARPER occupied a large factory, with offices and showroom attached, in Dilborough. They had no address. The name of the firm alone was quite sufficient to find them. Some people added the word Dilborough; some simply put Surrey; some merely England. They were known to everybody. Their motto—"Perfect Purity"—was in every daily paper every day. And during those weeks when the pickle manufacturing was going on, every little hamlet within a radius of twenty miles was aware of the fact if the wind set in that direction.

There was no Pentlove in the firm, and no Postlethwaite, and hardly any Sharper. An ex-schoolmaster, Diggle by name, had secured the entire control of the business. He had no partners, though Sharper had a small interest in the firm. He had achieved this position by unscrupulousness and low cunning. For of real ability he had not a trace. In fact, the staff mostly called him Cain, because he was not able. Another point of resemblance was that he was not much of a hand at a sacrifice. He looked after the

financial side of the business, and did a good deal of general interference in every branch of it.

The manufacturing side was under the control of Arthur Dobson, a red-faced man who had been with the firm for twenty years. He very wisely maintained its tradition of the very highest quality coupled with the very highest prices. "Perfect Purity." It was an admitted fact that Pentlove, Postlethwaite and Sharper actually used limes in the manufacture of lime juice. Another startling innovation was the use of calves' feet in the preparation of calf's-foot jelly. This was the more extravagant because, of course, only the front feet of the calf may be used for this purpose. Three back feet make one back-yard. Naturally the price was ruinous. But it all added to the reputation of the firm. And the best hotels thought it worth while to advertise that the pickles and preserves they provided were by Messrs. Pentlove, Postlethwaite and Sharper. It may be as well to add that Arthur Dobson was a knave. When he was talking to Cain he always slated Sharper. When he was talking to Sharper he always slated Cain. His specialty was the continuous discovery of some cheaper place in which to lunch. He would ask Luke Sharper to join him in these perilous adventures, but Luke, in his sunny way, always refused.

"Standoffish," said Dobson. "Damn standoffish."

Luke Sharper represented the literary side of the business. He wrote all the advertisements. It was a rule of the firm that the advertisements should be

scholarly, and that none should appear which did not contain at least one quotation from a classical language. Luke had also initiated the production of various booklets dealing with the materials and the methods of business. Nominally they were published; practically they were given away to any considerable purchaser. Some of these were written by Sharper himself. There was, for example, "The Romance of the Raspberry," of which the *Dilborough Gazette* had said: "An elegant little brochure." This was a great triumph. Even Diggle had to admit it. He had gone so far as to say that one of these fine days he would really have to think about making Sharper a partner. Other of the booklets were written in collaboration. For instance, in the composition of "Thoughts on Purity," Sharper had the assistance of the Reverend Noel Atall.

Luke kept a set of these booklets, bound in lilac morocco, in his room at the office. He loved them. He was proud of them. He regarded them as his children, and would sit for hours patting them gently. As the issue of each booklet was limited to one hundred copies, and it was customary to present one of them with each order of £20 or upwards, some of them were out of print, and difficult to obtain. This had been enough to start the collectors. In book catalogues there would sometimes appear a complete set of the Pentlove, Postlethwaite and Sharper booklets.

And the price asked was gratifying. Luke fainted with joy the first time he saw this in the catalogue.

At one time he had been in the habit of taking the booklet home in order to read it aloud to Mabel. He never did it now. It was hopeless. No insight. No sympathy. No appreciation. No anything. Blind and deaf to beauty. But she really was a good housekeeper.

2

Luke bicycled from home to business every morning, and from business to home every evening. He enjoyed this immensely. Every morning as he rode off he said to himself: "Further from Mabel. Further and further from Mabel. Every day, in every way, I'm getting further and further." On his return journey in the evening he experienced the same relief in getting further from old Cain, and further from the office.

At the middle point of his journey it always seemed to him that he did not belong to the office any more, and that he did not belong to Mabel either. He was all his own, in a world by himself. He would go on in a snow-white ecstasy. Then he would get up, dust his clothes, and re-mount.

He had some habits, which, to the stupid and censorious, might almost seem childish. He cut for himself with his little hatchet a number of pegs, and always carried some of them in his pocket. At every point on the road where he fell off, he drove in a peg. It

seemed to him a splendid idea. In a wave of enthusiasm he told Mabel all about it.

"Isn't it absolutely splendid?" he asked.

"Dotty," said Mabel, briefly.

He went out into the woodshed and cut more pegs.

One Monday morning as he started on his ride he saw before him at intervals all down the road little white specks. Yes, every one of those pegs had been painted white by somebody.

Who could have done it? He decided at once that it must be Mabel. She had repented of her harshness. She had made up her mind to try to enter more into his secret soul. This was her silent way of showing it. He determined that if this were so he would start kissing her again that evening. It overcame him completely. He drove in one more peg, and re-mounted.

"Mabel," he said that night at dinner, "It's good and sweet of you to have painted all those pegs white. It must have taken you a long time."

"Never touched your rotten old pegs," said Mabel. "Pass the salt."

His ears twitched.

3

Later that evening he sat alone in his bedroom. He also used this room as a study. He had been driven to this somewhat frowsty practice by the fact that he could not possibly sit in any room that had ever been called a den.

A tap at the door. Ellen Morse entered to turn the bed down. A bright idea flashed across Luke's mind. His ears positively jumped.

He believed in liberty, equality and familiarity, especially familiarity. So did Ellen Morse.

"Dot," he said, "was it you who painted my fall-pegs white?"

"Well, old bean," said Dot, "it was like this. I'll tell you." She seated herself on the bed. "You see, this house has only got four reception-rooms and eight bedrooms, and all the washing's done at home, and all the dressmaking, and there's a good deal of entertaining, mostly when you're not there, and everything has to be right up to the mark. Well, as there were the whole two of us to do it, your old woman thought time would be hanging heavy on our hands, so now we do the garden as well. The other day Mr. Doom Dagshaw was lunching here, and they were going to play tennis afterwards. Your bit of skirt has some proper games with that Dagshaw. I watch them out of the pantry window in my leisure moments. Well, anyhow, I'd to mark out the tennis court, and I mixed up a bit more of the stuff than was needed, and I thought I might as well use it up on your pegs. You see, I get a half-Sunday off every three months, and it was only a fourteen-mile walk there and back. And I'm sure I didn't know what else to do with my holiday."

"Dot," said Luke, "you seem to be able to enter into

things. You get the hang of my ideas. Some do, some don't. If you can sneak off for half-an-hour to-morrow evening we'll go and play at boats together."

"Boats?"

"Yes. You know the bridge. We get two pieces of wood, throw them in the stream on one side, then run across and watch them come out on the other. And the one that comes out first, wins. Won't that be glorious?"

"Well, you are one to think of things," said Dot.

(And now we'll have a little novelty. The Great Novelists of to-day number their sections. We'll have a number without any section. This has never been done be——



CHAPTER IV

It can be hardly necessary to say that Mabel caught Luke and Dot playing boats on the following evening. Luke was always discovered. He was even detected when he had done nothing.

As he dressed for dinner that night, he reflected that once more Mabel had disappointed him. He had expected her to get into a fury of jealousy, and to suspect him of the most criminal intentions with regard to Dot. This would have been real suffering for him, and he would have enjoyed it. But all she had said to him was that she wished he would behave a little more like a man and a little less like a baby, and an imbecile baby at that. All she had said to Dot was that she thought she could find her some other occupation. It was difficult for him to keep his temper. But he exercised self-control. In fact, he never spoke another word for the rest of the evening. It was a pity. He was such a pleasant man. Why could not Mabel see it?

Things were no better at breakfast next morning.

Mabel said, "Just fancy, Mrs. Smith in a sable stole at church last Sunday, and I know for a fact that he only gets three-ten. If it was real sable it was wicked, and if it was not she was acting a lie."

Luke smote the table once with his clenched fist, spilt his tea, and resumed his newspaper.

"Further from Mabel," he thought, as he mounted his bike. "Every day, in every way, I'm getting further and further."

About two miles from Dilborough he became suddenly aware that two motor-cars were approaching him. They were being driven abreast at racing speed, and occupied the whole of the road. For one moment Luke thought of remaining where he was, and causing Mabel to be a widow. Then, murmuring to himself, "Safety first," he ran up the grassy slope at the side of the road and fell off. Both the cars pulled up. A man's voice sang out cheerily: "Hallo, Sharper. Hallo, hallo. Who gave you leave to dismount?"

Luke recognized the voice. One of the cars was driven by Lord Tyburn, and the other by his wife, Jona.

Luke hurriedly drove in a peg to mark the spot, and came down into the road again.

"How's yourself?" said Lord Tyburn. "We've been away for two years. Timbuctoo, Margate. All over the place. Only got back to Gallows last night."

Luke shook hands with him and with Jona.

"You've not changed much," said Jona. "Same funny old face."

"It is the only one that I happen to have, Lady Tyburn."

"Oh, drop it. Call me Jona. You always used to,

Lukie, you know. And Bill don't mind; do you, Bill?"

"That? Lord, no. But what you have been and done, Sharper, is to spoil a very pretty and sporting event. Jona and I were racing to Halfpenny Hole, and I'd got her absolutely beaten."

"Liar," said Jona, "I was leading—leading by inches."

"Ah, but I'd lots in reserve."

"Strong, silent man, ain't you?" said Jona.

They both laughed.

"Yes," said Luke, "I'm afraid I was rather in the way. I seem to be almost always in the way. It happens at home. It happens at the office. I say, I wonder what you two would have done if you'd met a cart?"

"Jumped it," said Jona, and laughed again.

"Sorry," said Lord Tyburn, "but I must rush off. I've just spotted my agent, five fields away. So long, Sharper. Come up and inspect us soon."

He drove the car up the grassy slope, smashed a way through the hedge—after all, it was his own hedge—and vanished.

"He drives wonderfully," said Luke.

"He's that kind," said Jona. "He does everything well. He does himself well. Are you glad to see me again, Lukie?"

The tips of his ears crept slowly forward. "I shall have to think for a long time to know that I really am to see you again."

"'Fraid I can't wait a long time," said Jona. "See you again soon."

She waved her hand to him and drove off.

Luke rode on as if in a dream. Suddenly he became aware that he had passed the door of his office. He thought of turning round in the street and riding back, but he had turned round in the street once before, and a great number of people had been hurt. He dismounted and walked back.

As his custom was, he knocked at the door of Mr. Diggle's room and entered. Mr. Diggle, who still retained much of his school-master manner, sat at his desk with his back to Sharper. He did not look round.

"That you, Sharper?" he said.

"Yes, sir. Good morning," said Sharper.

Diggle went on writing for a minute in silence, and then said drearily: "Well, what is it?"

"Please can I have that partnership now?" asked Sharper.

"Not to-day. Don't fidget with your hands. Keep your ears quiet, if possible. Close the door gently as you go out."

Luke went gloomily back to his own room. He had not done himself justice. He never did do himself justice with Diggle. Diggle made him feel as if he were fifteen.

But thoughts of Diggle did not long occupy his mind. Once more he seemed to be standing in the road, with

the warm fragrance of petrol and lubricating oil playing on his face. Once more he saw her.

Jona.

Some would have hesitated to call her beautiful. To Luke she was all the beauty in the world. Concentrated. At one time Jona had had the chance of marrying him, but apparently she did not know a good thing when she saw it. Tyburn had the title and the property, and was better-looking and more amusing, and had stationary ears. But had he the character of a child martyr? He had not. Now Luke was great at martyrdom; also at childishness.

For nearly an hour Luke sat with his manuscript before him. He was writing another elegant little brochure. This one dealt with the jam-pots of Ancient Assyria. During that hour he did not write one single word, but thought continuously of Jona.

He pulled himself up abruptly. Why, he was married to Mabel. Of course, he was. It was just as if he could not trust his memory for anything these days. He had been rather rude to Mabel at breakfast. Well, not rude exactly, but not friendly. Mrs. Smith had a sable stole. He ought to have said something about it. He must try at once to think of something that would be said about a sable stole.

He must make it up to Mabel in some way. What could he give her? He could give her more of his society. He would stop work, go back to her at once, and be just as nice as nice could be.

He put on his hat, and met Diggle in the passage.

"Where are you going?" said Diggle.

"I was going home, sir," said Luke, "I'm not very well this morning."

(For a Christian martyr he certainly did lie like sin.)

"Don't let it occur again," said Diggle.

He encountered Mabel in the hall of his house. She had a letter in her hand. She seemed surprised to see him, and very far from pleased.

"What in goodness are you here for?" she said. "Forgotten something?"

He set his teeth. In spite of discouragement, he was going to be very nice indeed.

"I am afraid," he said, "I rather forgot my manners at breakfast this morning. Sorry."

"I didn't notice they were any worse than usual. You surely didn't come back to say that?"

"Oh, no. I thought we'd take a holiday together. Like old times, what? We'll go for a nice long walk, and take a packet of sandwiches and——"

"Oh, don't be silly. I can't possibly go out. Probably Mr. Doom Dagshaw is coming to lunch."

"He's a damned sweep," said Luke impulsively, and corrected himself. "I mean to say, he's not a man whose society I'm particularly anxious to cultivate."

"How was I to know you would come barging in like this? I never wanted you to meet him."

More self-control needed.

"I shall be perfectly pleasant and chatty to him," said Luke resolutely.

"This letter's just come for you," said Mabel. "The address is in Lady Tyburn's handwriting."

He blushed profusely. His ears waved to and fro. Why on earth had not Jona warned him that this was going to happen?"

"Read it," said Mabel.

He glanced through it. It was very brief.

"Well?" asked Mabel.

"It's nothing. Nothing at all."

"I should like to see it, if you don't mind."

She took the letter and read aloud: "Lukie, dear. Just back from two years' travel. You two might blow in to lunch one day. Any old day. Chops and tomato sauce. Yours, Jona."

"Most extraordinary," said Mabel. "Why does she call you Lukie?"

"Well, damn it all," said Luke, "she couldn't call me lucky. Oh, what does it matter? We were boy and girl together. Innocent friends of long standing."

"And what does this mean? Chops and tomato sauce? Chops! Gracious Heavens! And tomato sauce."

"It's just a joke. Silly, no doubt."

"It might be an allusion to your complexion at the present moment. It might be a mere substitute for

some endearing word or promise, agreeably to a preconcerted system of correspondence."

He had an uneasy feeling that he had heard or read all this before somewhere.

"Merely a joke," he pleaded. "And what does it matter?"

"She's a cat, anyhow. She'd better keep off the grass, and I'll tell her so. What did she say when she saw you this morning?"

"Hardly anything. Her husband was with her. I say, how on earth did you know?"

"Her husband was not with her when I met her. But do you know what this sudden return of yours means? This unusual desire to apologize for your manners, and to take me out for the day? Guilty conscience. I'm going into the garden to cut flowers for the luncheon table."

"Let me come with you and hold the scissors?"

"If you hold the scissors, how the dickens am I going to cut the flowers? You're really too trying."

No, it was not going well. More self-control would be needed. A happy idea struck him.

"Didn't you say that Mrs. Smith had a stable sole—I mean, a sable stole, in church or somewhere?"

"And you don't try that on either."

"I don't suppose I should look well in it," he said brightly.

He followed her into the garden. The flowers were cut, and subsequently arranged, in complete silence. He

had the feeling that anything he said might not be taken down, but would certainly be used in evidence against him.

And then, in the hall, was heard the voice of Mr. Doom Dagshaw, the proprietor of the Mammoth Circus at the Garden Settlement.

"Lunch ready? So it ought to be. Don't announce me. Waste of time. I know my way about in this house."

He entered. He was a young man of sulky, somewhat dictatorial expression. His dress had something of the clerical appearance, an effect at which he distinctly aimed.

"Hallo," he said, and sat down on the table and yawned. Then he caught sight of Luke.

"You here?" he said. "What for?"

"Just a little holiday," said Luke nervously, "a little treat for me. You don't mind?"

Doom Dagshaw did not answer him, but turned to Mabel.

"Lunch is ready," he said, "let's get on to it."

They passed into the dining-room. Luke observing salmon at one end of the table, and cutlets at the other, asked, with a smile, if those two sentences generally ran concurrently.

"Oh, hold your jaw," said Dagshaw.

"That's the way to talk to him," said Mabel approvingly.

"Yours, too," Dagshaw added, turning to Mabel.

"I'll do any talking that has to be done. I'm here to talk about my circus. Yes, and to eat ham. Isn't any? Ought to be. Give me three of those cutlets. You don't realize what a circus is, you people. It's a church. It's a cathedral. It's more."

"I hope," said Luke, "that it's getting on nicely, and will be a great success."

"Bound to be. Can't help it. When I bought the land from the Garden Settlement Syndicate I made it a condition that there should be a clause in every lease granted that a year's season ticket should be taken for the Mammoth Circus."

"I don't quite see," said Mabel, "how it's like a church."

"The circus has a ring. The ring is a circle. The circle is the symbol of eternity. Will anybody be able to see my highly-trained chimpanzee in the trapeze act without realizing as he has never realized before, the meaning of the word uplift? Think of the stars in their program. And by what strenuous discipline and self-denial they have reached their high position."

"*'Per ardua ad astra,'*" quoted Luke.

"Hold your jaw. Three more cutlets. Think of the clowns. They tumble over, they fall from horses, they fail to jump through the rings. They are lashed by the whip of the ring-master. What a lesson in reverence is here. People who jeer, people who make fun, people who parody great works of fiction always and invariably come to a bad end. It will be not only a

mammoth circus but a moral circus. It will be the greatest ethical institution in this part of the world. Its work will be more subtle than that of any other. Its appeal will be to the unconscious rather than to the conscious mind. Freud never thought of that. I did it myself. I am a genius. Potatoes."

After lunch it was suggested that Mr. Doom Dagshaw should take Mabel up to the Garden Settlement to see the progress that was being made in the building of the Mammoth Circus.

"You won't care to come?" said Mabel to her husband. And it seemed less like a question than a command.

"No, not in my line," said Luke, still doing his best. "Hope you'll enjoy yourselves."

When they had gone, Luke retired to his study-bedroom. There was a tap at the door. It was Dot who entered.

"She's out," said Dot. "Boats?"

"Right-o. Gorgeous," said Luke.

* * * * *

Normally dinner was at half-past seven. But Mabel did not get back till a quarter to eight. It was eight o'clock before they began. Mabel offered no explanation beyond saying that there really had been a great deal of architectural detail to examine. Luke had prepared a series of six pleasant and gratifying things to say about Mr. Doom Dagshaw and the Mammoth Circus. He found himself absolutely unable to say any

of them. He could say other things. He could say "Windmill, watermill" ten times over, very quickly, without a mistake. But somehow he could not say Mammoth Circus.

Well, at any rate, he might be bright and amusing. At this time it was customary—perhaps too customary—to ask if you had read a certain book by a certain author, the name of the author being artfully arranged so as to throw some light on the title of the book. Luke remembered three of these which had been told him at the office. Unfortunately they were all of them far too improper for general use.

So he just said any bright thing that came into his mind. Mabel looked very tired. She admitted she was tired. She said she had walked about a thousand miles.

"And then I come back to this kind of thing," she said.

The rest of the dinner, which was brief, passed in complete silence. Then Mabel went into the drawing-room, and Luke remained behind and lit a cigarette.

"This will never do," he said to himself. "I must keep it up. I must be pleasant. I must say number one of those six sentences about Doom Dagshaw and the Mammoth Circus, even if it splits my palate and my tongue drops out."

He threw down his cigarette, walked firmly into the drawing-room, and closed the door. "Mabel," he said,

"I hope you enjoyed your visit to the Doom Circus with Mr. Mammoth Dagshaw."

Mabel looked up coldly from the book she was reading.

"Back again already?" she said. "Well, what was it you were saying?"

"I was saying," said Luke gaily, "that I hoped you enjoyed your visit to the Dammoth Circus with Mr. Dag Moomshaw."

"Port never did agree with you," said Mabel. "You shouldn't take it." She resumed her book.

Luke tried the second of the pleasant sentences.

"Dagshaw always seems to me to be one of those masterful men who sooner or later——"

He ducked his head just in time, and the book which Mabel had thrown knocked over the vase of flowers behind him.

"If you can't let me read in peace," she said, "at any rate, you shan't sneer at my friends. You're always doing it, and everybody notices it. I simply can't understand you. You're like nothing on earth. What have you done with that love-letter of yours?"

"Oh, come," he said, "I've had no love letter."

"You silly liar; I mean the letter from your Lady Tyburn. Have you been kissing it?"

"Really, Mabel, this is absurd. I might as well ask you if you have been kissing the Mammoth Circus."

"I'm going to bed," said Mabel abruptly. "I'm

absolutely fed up with you. I'm sick to death of you. I hate you. And I despise you."

She went out and slammed the door violently. Four more vases went over, and three pictures fell.

Luke went over to the open window and looked out into the cool night. At the house opposite a girl was singing very beautifully "The End of a Perfect Day."

CHAPTER V

As he sat in his office on the following Thursday morning, the whistle of the speaking-tube sounded shrilly and interrupted him in the act of composition. He went angrily to the tube.

"What do you want to interrupt me for," he called, "when you know I'm busy? What the devil do you want, anyway?"

"I want you, Lukie," said a gentle voice in reply.

"Come up at once," he said. "Awfully sorry. Frightfully glad you've come. If there's a chance of making a mistake within a hundred miles of me, I seldom miss it."

Lady Tyburn came radiantly into the room, drawing off her gloves.

"Nasty shock for you, isn't it?" she said. She held out both hands to him. "Will you . . . will you help yourself?"

"Thanks," he said, as he clasped them warmly. "I will have some of each."

After a minute or two she withdrew her hands and sat down.

"Has that dirty dog given you a partnership yet?" she asked.

"Diggle? Not yet. I ask him from time to time. He always seems too busy to talk about it at any length. It's wonderful to see you here, Jona."

"You got my letter?"

"I did. In fact, there was some considerable beano about it at home. But never mind about that."

"You didn't come to see me, so I was drawn here. Magnet and tin-tack."

He looked at her little white nose. "I see the point," he said.

"Say some more," she said, "I like to hear you talk, Funnyface. Funny old ears. Funny old cocoanut with, oh, such a lot of milk in it. You do think a lot of thinky thoughts, don't you. And you put them all down in those dear little books of yours."

"Not all," said Luke, "I'm limited in my subjects. Jam, you know. Pickles. Sardines. That hurts—to be limited. I want to be free. Here, I am imprisoned. I am buried alive. Plunged, still teething, in the brougham."

"Still teething? I knew you were young at heart. Still, at the age of thirty-two——"

"I had intended to say that I was plunged, still breathing, in the tomb. I do get carried away so. Sometimes I form plans. I think I will leave this business and write my biography. It would be a record, not of the facts that are, but of the facts as I should like them to be."

"Brilliant," said Jona.

"I don't know," said Luke, wagging his ears, "I sometimes doubt whether I am sufficiently in touch with real life. I must consult somebody about it."

"Consult me. No, not now. Show me the first of the little books that you ever wrote."

He handed her the little lilac-bound copy of "The Romance of a Raspberry." She put it reverently to her lips, patted it gently, and laid it down again.

"Do you talk it over with Mabel? Isn't Mabel tremendously proud of it?"

"She is tremendously proud, but she has great self-restraint." He recalled the end of the perfect day. "As a general rule," he added, "when nothing happens to irritate her."

"Does she love you very much?"

"I don't remember her mentioning anything of the kind recently. But it's you I want to talk about, Jona. Tell me about your life."

"I don't live. I'm marking time. You throw a brick into the stream——"

"No," said Luke, "not a brick. I sometimes play boats."

"I was going to say," Jona continued, "that the brick remains motionless while the stream goes past it."

"But cannot we apply the principle of relativity here?" he asked. "May it not be that the stream stands still while the brick goes past it? It would appear so to the brick."

"That's one of your dinky, thinky thoughts, isn't it?"

A sound of uproar, of crashes and loud voices, came up from the street below.

"I wonder what that is?" said Luke.

"It's Bill, probably. He said he'd call for me." She crossed over to the window and looked out. "Yes, that's Bill. Driving the team of zebras he got from Doom Dagshaw. The horses don't seem to like it. There's a cart and horse just gone in at that draper's window. Quite a number of horses seem to have fallen down on the pavement. There's a policeman with a note-book. He seems to be asking Bill questions. And Bill's making him laugh. He manages those zebras perfectly. He does everything well."

Luke had joined her at the window. "Who's the lady sitting beside him?" he asked.

"One of his harem. Staying with us. Don't pity me. I deserve nothing. I made a mistake once. Don't ask me what. Don't come down with me. Good-bye, Lukie, dear."

Luke watched her as she drove off. And then Mr. Diggle entered without knocking.

"Who's your lady friend?" said Diggle, snappishly. "I mean the one that's just gone off in the circus. Simply unendurable. The whole street outside my business premises in confusion. I opened my window to look out, and that man pointed me out with his whip and said to the girl beside him: 'That's our Mr. Diggle. If you like our chutney, try our cheddar.' I shall go down and speak to the policeman at once. This

sort of thing must be stopped. Come, come, Sharper, give me the name, please."

"The lady who called to see me," said Luke, "was Lady Tyburn. It was her husband who was driving the zebras."

"That makes a difference. Our spirited young aristocracy! I understand that the firm's productions are used exclusively up at Gallows. Glad you mentioned the name, Sharper."

"And can I have that partnership now?" asked Luke.

"Not immediately. Get on with your work."

* * * * *

But it was impossible to work with the image of Jona still in his mind. He was puzzled. Grasping one ear in each hand he tried to think it out. What had she meant by "help yourself," and "the magnet and the tin-tack?" Why had she kissed "The Romance of the Raspberry?" What did she mean by "I made a mistake?" It almost looked as if . . .

No, it could not be that.

Still, really you know, when you came to think about it . . .

He walked over to the window once more. In the street below the policeman was instructing a group of drivers, the draper, and other persons concerned, that all applications for compensation should be sent in to Lord Tyburn, and that they would be dealt with strictly in rotation.



CHAPTER VI

I

ON his arrival at the office next morning Luke was somewhat surprised to receive a visit in his office from Mr. Arthur Dobson. Apparently Mr. Dobson had something on his mind. He wandered about nervously saying incoherent things about the weather.

"Anything doing?" asked Luke.

"Nothing much. I say, I've found a new place to lunch at. It's run by an Italian, Malodorato. Quite a little place, in Mud Lane. Still there it is, you know. Five courses for one and threepence. That takes some beating."

"Stuff must be pretty bad."

"Well, possibly yes. But think what a lot of it you get for your money. Come and lunch there to-day."

"Thanks. I have promised to go up to Gallows to-day to lunch with the Tyburns."

"You and your aristocratic friends. Well, I could tell you something, Mr. Sharper. I ought not to. It would have to be distinctly understood that you don't breathe a word about it to a soul."

"Of course, of course."

"Very well, then. You look at that sheet of office paper. Old Cain has got his name above the line, and yours and mine beneath it. Well, I may tell you that in a few days' time the only name below the line will be your own. I'm being taken into partnership."

"What a damned shame! I mean to say, I congratulate you. That old blighter has been talking about taking me into partnership for the last two years. At any rate, I have."

"I only talked to him about it once. You see, I happen to be the only one of us three that understands the manufacturing side. You've never been inside the factory in your life. Diggle hardly ever goes, except to make a fool of himself by some damn silly suggestion. No, he keeps to the financial side. He's got a whole pack of doubtful financial dodges, and he'll get seven years for one of them some day. All I did was to tell Diggle that I was applying for the post of manager in a certain rival firm, having had twenty years' experience here. And I asked him if he would give me a testimonial. He said: 'No, but I will give you a partnership.' You don't seem to get hold of the right way of doing things, Sharper."

"All the same," said Sharper, "I'm going straight off to Diggle's room now, and I'm going to give him hell."

"Oh, I say, you can't do that. If he knew I'd told you, there'd be the very devil of a row."

"Oh, he won't know. I may be a high-minded suf-

ferer, but I'm a very fair liar as well. I'll put it right for you."

He entered Mr. Diggle's room. Mr. Diggle, seated with his back to him, continued the letter he was writing.

"Look here," said Sharper impulsively, "what have you been and done with that partnership of mine?"

"That you, Sharper? Sit down. I shall be a minute or two. I said, sit down. I did not ask you to twist your feet round the legs of the chair. Refrain also from wagglng your toes violently. It interrupts my train of thought. Keep the hand still, if you please. Thank you."

There were three minutes of absolute silence during which Diggle, in the most leisurely way possible, finished and blotted his letter.

"And now, Sharper," said Diggle, "I think you wished to say something."

"Well, I mean to say, what have you been and done with my partnership?"

"I was not aware that you had one."

"No, but you promised me. And now you've gone and given it to Dobson."

"I promised you nothing. And that, I think, is what you have got. Dobson is very gravely in error in telling you anything at all about it. If you will kindly send him here, I will speak to him on the subject."

"Dobson never said a single word about it. I'll

take my Bible oath he never did. He came into my room and began to speak in rather a dictatorial way, and I said, 'You might be a partner,' and he blushed."

"I do not think so," said Diggle. "Dobson does not blush. If he did blush it could not show on that complexion."

"But on my word of honor he did. White-faced men blush red. Red-faced men blush purple. Any man of science will tell you that."

"The appointment of a partnership is entirely within my discretion. It has nothing to do with you. If you have nothing further to say, I need not detain you."

"I've a lot more to say, only I can't think of it. I never can. But it's there. Inside my head. On the letter paper you and he will have your names above the line, and mine will be below it."

"That merely shows that I know where to draw the line. I wish you did."

"It's not for myself I mind so much. It's those dear little books of mine. All bound in lilac morocco. Sitting down. It's just as if they were slighted. If this kind of thing goes on, I shan't play any more."

"I'm not asking you to. But you can return to your work. And you remind me. I have had a bill from the binders of those books sent in to the firm's account. I have explained that this should be charged to your private account. You will get it in due course. Close the door quietly, please, as you go out."

On his way back to his own room Luke again encountered Arthur Dobson.

"It's all right," said Luke, "I said you didn't tell me, but had given it away by blushing when I chanced to speak of it."

"Couldn't you have thought of a better one than that?"

"Oh, it's all right. And I don't mind telling you I've given him a pretty good dressing-down. I let him have the rough side of my tongue."

"Ah," said Dobson, "now that really is something like a lie."

Luke went back to his own room and sat there deep in thought. Why was everybody so hard and cold? Diggle, Dobson, Mabel—they were all so cruel and rude to him. Nobody loved him. Except Dot and Dash, and possibly . . .

No, that was not to be thought of.

All the same it reminded him that it was time for him to brush his hair and wash his little hands, and go up to lunch at Gallows.

2

It was a large luncheon party, for Gallows was full of guests. Everybody was very merry and bright, except Luke. Tyburn was specially elated, for his little drive with the zebras had only cost thirteen hundred altogether. There had apparently been a terrific rag the night before. While the guests were at dinner, Tyburn

arranged for a number of wild beasts to be brought up from the Mammoth Circus. One was put into the bedroom of each guest to greet him or her on going to bed. No, there had been no real damage done. One of the lions had fainted. It had been given sal volatile, and had recovered. Only three of the animals and two of the guests were missing. And one of the guests was a Bishop who had never been really wanted. Jona told the whole story hilariously.

Why was it, Luke asked himself, that she was always so merry and bright with others, and so very different when she was with him? Could it be that she wore a mask to the rest of the world, and disclosed her real self only to him? It could. It could also be just the other way round. That was the annoying part of it.

He was depressed during lunch. The story of Tyburn's practical joke of the previous evening had upset him. He did not like these practical jokes. He was nervous. He felt that at any moment, at a preconcerted signal, the table might blow up, or the ceiling fall down. Everybody else would laugh, and he would hate it. He seldom laughed at anything anybody else laughed at, though he enjoyed some little jokes of his own that nobody else seemed to appreciate. Especially Mabel. She seemed to be enjoying herself at the other side of the table, laughing at the stories that Major Capstan was telling her. From the Major's expression, Luke diagnosed that the stories were not quite—well,

not exactly—oh, you know. Would it be Doom Dagshaw or Major Capstan? Oh, what was he thinking of?

Why had he not been put next to Jona? Why did the girl on his right, whom he had never met before, persist in addressing him as Funnyface? Why is a mouse when it spins? The world was full of conundrums.

In the garden after lunch, Jona came straight up to him.

"We are going to play games," she said.

"What games?"

"Well, this morning we played leap-frog down the stairs. That was a little idea of Bill's."

Luke had noticed at lunch that two of the guests wore sticking-plaster on their noses. This explained it.

"I don't think I should like playing leap-frog," he said. "I sometimes play at boats with Dot."

"We'll play at hide-and-seek," said Jona. "You and I will hide together. Come along."

They hid in the cool dusk of the tool-shed. Jona sat on the wheelbarrow and talked, and talked, and talked.

At the end of half-an-hour, Luke had failed to ask her what she had meant by certain things on the day that she had called at his office. He made rather a specialty of not being able to say anything that he particularly wanted to say.

He said: "It's funny they've not found us yet."

"Not so very funny," said Jona. "You see, I forgot to tell any of them that we were going to play this game. Here's one of the gardeners coming. Damn. I suppose we'd better join the rest of the crowd."

It was not until Mabel and Luke were leaving that Luke got a chance of another word with Jona.

"We're leaving for town to-morrow," said Jona. "You'll write and tell me everything that's in your old head, won't you?"

Luke felt that he ought not to write. Mabel would not like it. It would be wrong.

"Thanks," he said, "we so seldom have any postage stamps in the house. And I've lost my Onoto pen, and I sprained my wrist falling off my bicycle."

"Oh, do write, Lukie dear." She held out her hand to him.

"Good-by," he said, and ran down the steps. At the bottom of the steps stood the cab, an interesting antique, which was to convey Mabel home. Mabel and Major Capstan were waiting near the door.

"You only took about twenty minutes saying good-by to Lady Tyburn," said Mabel. "I'm giving Major Capstan a lift. If you think it's fair on the horse to ask it to draw the three of us, get in, of course. Otherwise, it's beautiful weather for a nice walk."

"I will walk," said Luke. "I prefer it." He wished to be alone.

He sat down on the first milestone in the road, and meditated with his head in his hands.

Mabel. His wife. He was very good to her. He had been perfectly faithful to her. And was it worth while? What did she think about him? How much did she care for him? There were two men after her. He seemed to visualize the situation as a scrap from the stop-press of a newspaper.

1. MABEL.
2. DOOM.
3. CAPSTAN.

'Also ran. Luke Sharper, Esq.

3

He recalled some of the things Jona had said to him in the tool-shed. She had been rather frank in speaking of her husband.

"Bill's wonderful," she said. "He caught the tiger last night. When the keeper couldn't get it. He does everything well. He is the most fascinating man in the world—until you get used to him. I've got used to him. He fascinates all women. That would not matter so much, but nearly all women fascinate him. I pretend not to notice it. I think he does it partly to see how I will take it. I remain merry and bright. With a breaking heart, you understand. How much longer I shall be able to stand it, I do not know. Oh, my hands are so cold."

He had noticed a pair of the gardener's gloves lying

on the lawn-mower. He handed them to her. She flung them away, a little petulantly it seemed to him.

He rose from the milestone and walked on. Certain words seemed to keep time with his footsteps. "She wants me to write to her. And I ought not. She wants me to write to her. And I ought not."

He passed the post-office, and turned back to it again. Went on, and again turned back. This time he entered with his mind all bemused.

"Have you any nice stamps?" he asked.

CHAPTER VII

MABEL looked very enraged as she entered the house. "Anything the matter?" he enquired.

"Yes. You might not think so. As I do, probably you wouldn't. But Ellen's got a new parasol, and Kate's got a swollen knee, and has got to have it up."

"And I suppose it will be just the same with Ellen's parasol. I suppose you wanted it the other way round—Dot to have the parasol and Ellen to have the——"

"I wanted nothing of the kind. Why should I want my cook to go peacocking about with a pink parasol, making a fool of herself, and bringing disgrace on the house? Why should I want Kate to be incapacitated from doing her proper work?"

"I think," said Luke, "I must go and see it."

"Go and see Kate's knee? Don't be indelicate."

"No, I meant the parasol. I should imagine that Dot's knee has solely a pathological interest at present. But I did mean the parasol—I swear it. How did it come about?"

"Love of finery. Vanity. Passion for wasting her money."

"Oh, this time I meant the knee—not the parasol."

"Well, that was just absolute selfishness. All servants love to get swollen knees, and chilblains and chapped hands. They like to make a fuss about themselves. And to make their employer pay a substitute to do their work. They're all like that. It was just the same before I married. Yes, every housemaid I employ. Contracts these swollen kneeses. They only do it to annoy. Because they know it teases."

"But what are you going to do about it? Have you got medical advice? Do you think a nurse will be needed? When I had the measles the only things I fancied were——"

"Kate has not got measles. She's got a cold compress, and she's got the entire contents of the plate-chest to clean. And when she's finished that, I'll find her something else. If she thinks she can't work sitting down, she will discover that she is mistaken."

"Wait a minute. I've got a joke. A real one this time. Dot with a swollen knee. We shall have to call her Dot-and-go-one. See? Well, why don't you laugh? I must go into the kitchen and tell them at once."

Mabel sighed deeply. There were simply no words for him. He was right away outside, beyond the limit. In a few minutes he came back again.

"It certainly does look very pink," he said.

"That's the effect of the cold compress. Though why on earth you should——"

"I didn't mean the knee, I meant the parasol. I'll swear I did."

"Well, whatever you meant, I wish you would keep out of the kitchen. I wish you wouldn't address the servants by nicknames. I wish you wouldn't be so abominably familiar with them."

"Familiar? Well, hang it all, when a poor girl's got a swollen knee it's unfriendly not to show a little sympathy. It does no harm. I just chatted her on the peak——"

"You——?"

"As I said, I just patted her on the cheek, and asked her how she was getting on. No harm in that."

"And now perhaps you'll tell me what on earth I'm to do for a substitute. I don't know of a single girl in this neighborhood who could come in and help."

"I have it. I can save the situation. I have an idea. On the 16th inst., at Jawbones, Halfpenny Hole, Surrey, Mr. Luke Sharper, of an idea. Both doing well."

"Would you mind telling me what you are talking about?"

"I'm talking about old Vessunt. He's a foreman. Up at the factory. Fine old chap. Religious but quite honest. He's got a daughter, Effie. Very superior girl. And she's looking for a job. I can get her for you to-morrow morning. Effie Vessunt. Rather bright and sparkling, what?"

"At any rate, I can see her."

"You can, even with the naked eye. But I say, you know, she really is rather superior. She'll have to have her meals with us."

"If I engage her, she will feed in the kitchen."

"Mabel, must you always disagree with me? Have you no spirit of compromise? Can't you meet me half way in a little thing like this?"

"If I met you half way the girl would have her meals in the passage. And I don't suppose she'd like it, and anyhow she'd be in everybody's way."

"And this when I've just been of real use to you."

"So you ought to be. You were indirectly responsible for the accident that gave Kate the swollen knee. It was your wretched old push-bike that she fell over."

Luke wagged his ears. "Indirectly," he said. "There are many of us in it indirectly. Dunlop, for instance. Niggers in a rubber plantation. Factories in Coventry. A retail shop in High Holborn. And me. All working together. Combining and elaborating in order to give Dot a nasty one on the knee-cap. It's rather a great thought when you come to think it out that way."

"I can't see why you want to ride that old job-lot of scrap-iron at all. You might just as well go by train, now that the new line is opened. All my friends do it. Why can't you go by train?"

"I believe I know the answer to that one. Don't tell me. I'll go upstairs and think it out."

He went up to the frowsty study-bedroom, and sat

down at his table. Mechanically he drew from his pocket the sheet of thirty stamps with which, after a few disparaging remarks, the lady at the post-office had supplied him. He spread them out before him. Thirty stamps. Thirty letters to Jona. He felt inclined to kiss every one of them.

He did not do so. He reflected that in the ordinary course of affixing them to the envelope he would put them to his lips in any case. It was not sense to do the same piece of work twice over.

Jona.

Should he, or shouldn't he? He knew that he shouldn't. Mabel would not like it. He ought to put Jona out of his mind, and to burn those stamps. But that was not economical. It was possible to have thirty stamps, and yet to avoid writing thirty love-letters to Jona. He folded them up and put them back in his pocket.

What was it he had come up to do? He remembered. Mabel had asked him a question. He ran downstairs and rejoined her.

"Because of the season ticket," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you asked me why I couldn't go by train. I could get a season ticket, but I should lose it the first day. Then they fine you forty shillings, and make you buy another. And that would go on, and on, and on until I was bankrupt and a beggar. And we should have to go down the High Street together, singing

hymns. And you never did have any voice, and——”

“Oh, that’ll do,” said Mabel, wearily.

“Look here,” he said, brightly, “I’ve brought you a present, Mabel. I think you will find these useful.”

He produced the postage stamps from his pocket.

“Just a few stamps,” he said.

“All right,” said Mabel, not taking them. “Stick them down anywhere.”

“They should be stuck down in the top right-hand corner,” he said; “but I leave it all entirely to you.”

He went out. She had not even thanked him.

CHAPTER VIII

EFFIE VESSUNT remained at Jawbones for a fortnight. At the end of that time Dot's knee had, so to speak, submitted and returned to barracks, and she could resume her ordinary work. Effie went to Bournemouth, where she took a position as kennel maid.

Luke heard nothing from Jona. Occasionally he saw her name in the newspaper as one of those present at some social function. Twice he read that her husband had been fined for being drunk while driving a motor-car. Beyond this, nothing. Luke adhered to his resolution. He never sent her a letter. He wrote one. It was a long and passionate letter, full of poetry and beauty. But he never posted it.

He made a paper boat of it. And launched it on that old-world stream. It floated away under the bridge, and on and on for nearly twenty yards. Then an old-world cow came down to the edge of the stream and ate it. The cow died.

And so the months passed away. He completed another little monograph for the firm entitled "Pulp," of which he said beautifully that it was the beginning of all jam and the end of all books. Then he remembered

that Jona had rather seemed to encourage him in his idea of writing his biography. He planned it all out in his mind. He pictured himself wrongly suspected, loathed by everybody (except Jona), suffering horribly, terribly ill. He thoroughly enjoyed it.

He enjoyed it so much that he felt he had to tell Mabel about it. He did.

"Mabel," he said, "have you ever realized that under certain circumstances the most awful things would happen to me that ever befell the hero of a melodrama? Just take the train of events. Effie has an illegitimate child. She writes and tells you about it."

"But she wouldn't," said Mabel. "She was with me for a fortnight, and I always kept her in her place."

"Well, she refuses to say who the father is."

"Why?" asked Mabel.

"Because the story can't possibly go on if she doesn't. Please don't interrupt me again until I've finished. Effie has no money. She goes to see her father, who will take her in, but not the child. It's an accepted convention that the unmarried mother must be parted from her child. So Effie and the baby turn up here. I say that they shall stay. You say that in that case you'll go, which you do, having previously dismissed Dot and Dash. In consequence, everybody in this neighborhood cuts me, I am turned out of my business, and as the dates agree, I am believed to be the father of the child. Effie has the housework to do as well as the baby to look after, and in consequence, I

am horribly neglected. The handle of the front door is not polished, and when an old friend comes down from London to see me, I have nothing to give him for lunch except cold meat and a fruit tart that is no longer in its first youth. So I take a week-end at Brighton without Effie. She cleans my straw hat with oxalic acid, which I have bought for her. I throw away the hat and buy another. While I am at Brighton she kills herself and the baby with what is left of the oxalic acid. At the inquest I am unable to say anything except 'Look here,' am severely censured by the coroner's jury, and nearly lynched by the crowd outside. I go back to the house and find a letter on the clock, which entirely clears me and tells me that the father of the child is the son of Dobson, the dirty dog who sneaked my partnership. So I go to see Dobson and find that he has just got the news that his son is dead. I therefore burn Effie's letter so as to get the sole evidence of my innocence out of the way, and then have a hæmorrhage of the brain. And you divorce me, and then——"

"Look here, Luke, you'd better go and lie down for a little. You've been bicycling in the sun, you know."

"What do you mean? Wouldn't it happen so? Isn't it all absolutely inevitable?"

"Not absolutely," said Mabel. "The previous knowledge that one has of you would go for something. There was never any sign of an attachment of that kind between you and Effie. If you had been the

father of the child you would most certainly not have left her alone, without any provision, at the time the child was born. I should be quite certain of that. So would the two maids here. Effie would apply to young Dobson, and failing him, to old Dobson. This is about the last house to which she would come. Her instinct would be to keep away from the neighborhood where she was known. If her own father agreed to take her in, it's almost certain that he would take the baby as well. Your ideas about that convention are exaggerated, and old-fashioned. If she did come here, and you insisted on her staying, I should put up with it, though I should not like it, until some arrangement could be made for her to go elsewhere with her child. And that arrangement could be made easily and quickly. I do not see why I should dismiss the maids, and if I did they are paid with your money, and are much more devoted to you than they are to me. You would only have to speak and they would remain. No seducer would bring his victim and her child to the house where his wife was living. You would be thought quixotic but not guilty. If Effie saw that you were cut by everybody and that she had brought trouble on you, she would be particularly careful not to cause more serious trouble for you by committing suicide. And if she committed suicide, she would not implicate you in it by making you buy the poison. She would neither make fruit tart, nor clean a straw hat, because she simply would not have

the time. You don't know much about young babies, do you? I should not divorce you, and should have no evidence on which I could get a divorce. In fact, the whole thing's skittles. By the way, when did Effie have her baby?"

"She never did," said Luke despondently. "That's always the way. Whenever I make a beautiful thing, some cow always gets it. It's happened before. If I wrote my beautiful biography, some cow would parody it. The world's full of cows."

"Well, I'm sorry, of course," said Mabel. "You can do most incredibly foolish things. You do frequently fail to say what you should say. But even with those advantages, I doubt if it would be possible for you to incur so much suffering and suspicion as you describe. I shall have to think out some other little martyrdom for you."

CHAPTER IX

I

LOOKING out of his window at the office in the afternoon, Luke Sharper saw a motor-car stop in front of the draper's opposite. Lady Tyburn got out and entered the shop. So she was back.

Putting on his hat, so far as his agitated ears would permit, Luke rushed out into the street, crossed the road, and met her as she came out.

"Jona," he panted.

"Lukie, at last," she gasped.

"You were not long in the shop!"

"Just the same length that I am outside. I have been there three times to-day. Standing there, looking up at your window. Every time I bought a yard of elastic. Do you want any elastic?"

"No, thank you. Will you have a cup of tea?"

Emotion would not permit her to speak. But she nodded and got into the car. He followed her. On the way to the confectioner's neither of them spoke a word.

At the tea-room the following conversation took place: "Tea?"

"Please."

"Milk?"

"Thanks."

"Sugar?"

"No."

"Buns?"

"One."

And then they sat and gazed at one another, slowly champing buns in which they took no interest whatever. After twenty minutes Lady Tyburn said: "My chauffeur has had no tea. He must drive to Gallows and have tea at once. Will you come too?"

"As far as the gates," he said. "I'll walk back. I'm not coming in."

"Do," she said. "Bill has borrowed a panther from the Mammoth Circus, and they're having larks with it in the billiard-room."

Luke shook his head. "I don't like panthers," he said wearily. "I don't like anything much. Mabel looks like a panther sometimes."

During the twenty minutes' drive up to Gallows neither of them spoke.

When they reached the gate, Jona said: "Better come up to the house and finish our talk."

"No," said Luke; "stay here a little. There's something I must say to you. I've been trying to say it for the last hour. It gets stuck. I shall pull it out somehow."

Lady Tyburn sent the car away, and they sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree. He sat on one side, and

she on the other, back to back. They could not bear to look one another in the face. Presently she said:

"You're trembling, Lukie. I can feel it. Trembling. Like a jelly."

"You're another," said Luke. "Oh, Jona. There's something I've been trying to ask you for the last ten months, and perhaps there will never be another opportunity. Do you remember when you came to my office?"

She drove her elbow lightly into his ribs. It seemed to him to signify she did remember.

"There were things you said—'Will you help yourself,' with your hands out—'magnet and tincture'—'I made a mistake once.' You said those things, Jona."

"What a memory the young man has got," said Jona, wistfully.

"Yes, but what did you mean?"

"Well, they were what is called conversation. You talk too, you know, sometimes."

"But that doesn't tell me what you meant."

"They meant," she said in a plain, matter-of-fact way, "that I ought not to have married Bill. I ought to have married you, Lukie. My mistake entirely. Don't apologize."

She jerked herself backward, and he fell off the tree. He lay on the grass moaning. "O crikey! O crikey! O crikey, crikey, crikey!"

He got up slowly. He was entirely covered with small pieces of dried grass. Jona came round the end of the tree and began picking pieces of grass off him.

"You're in a mess," she said.

"We're both in a mess," he said. "Right in. Up to the neck."

"I don't know how much longer I shall be able to stand it," said Jona. "In London it was actresses. Down here it's ladies from the Mammoth Circus. We have three equestriennes and a tight-rope dancer staying with us, and he makes love to them all. He's not been sober—not noticeably—for the last six weeks. I still keep up the bright badinage, but it sometimes seems artificial. It's wearing thin. Everything's wearing thin. Very thin. Oh Lukie!"

"Listen," said Luke resolutely. "I'm going to be noble. This is little Lukie, underneath his straw hat, being noble. Some men would confess their love for you. They would pour out in words the passion that was consuming them. I shall not. In fact, you'll have to guess. Only, if the time ever does come that you simply cannot stand it any longer, apply to me. Applications should be sent to the office address in care of Mabel. Write distinctly. Good-by, Jona."

He tore himself from her, and reeled away, not knowing what direction he was taking.

After an hour he found himself standing in front

of his own office. It was just as well. He had left his bicycle there.

Diggle came down the stairs into the street, and Luke walked up to him at once: "Can I have that partnership now?" said Luke.

Diggle glanced at his watch.

"Applications of this kind," he said, "should be made in office hours. It is now after six. Good evening, Mr. Sharper."

Mechanically, automatically, not knowing what he did, Luke prepared for his ride home to Jawbones. Then he became aware that he was pushing something along on the pavement. What was it? It was a bicycle. He pushed it into a policeman. The policeman asked him to take it into the road.

He walked along in the road now, still wheeling his bicycle, and looking all around him.

What a lot of shops seemed to be selling brooms. Yes, and soap. Long bars of yellow soap. There were big advertisements on the boardings. He read them aloud: "WASHO. WORKS BY ITSELF."

And again: "PINGO FOR THE PAINT. A PENNY PACKET OF PINGO DOES THE TRICK." There was a picture of a beautiful lady using Pingo, her face expressing rapture.

What did it all mean?

He did not know. But it meant that spring was coming. Spring, with its daffodils, its pretty little birds and all the other things.

He mounted and rode away. A meaningless string of words seemed to circle round and round in his brain.

"Jona. Washo. Crikey."

At dinner that night, Mabel said: "We shall begin our spring-cleaning to-morrow. I intend that it shall be done particularly thoroughly this year. It will take some weeks and will probably cause you inconvenience. But you like suffering, don't you?"

"Spring," said Luke, thoughtfully. "Not all daffodils. No."

3

A little later Mr. Alfred Jingle, solicitor, talking to his friend the artist, may be permitted to throw some light on events.

"Saw Sharper yesterday. Don't like it. Awful. Went to his house. What? Yes, looking for lunch. Brass knob on the front door blazing fit to blind you. No curtains at any of the windows. Sound like a carpet being beaten from the garden at the back. Sharper himself leaning out of upstairs window. Face ashen grey. Ears twitching. 'Don't come in,' he calls out, 'I'll come down. Lunch in Dilborough.'"

"Terrific noise of Sharper falling downstairs. Out he comes, rubbing knee. Hat bashed in.

"'Had a little accident,' he says. 'They took out the stair rods. Carpet loose. We'll go in by train. Wouldn't ask you to lunch here. Had dinner in the

bath-room last night. Mabel's got her head in a duster.'

"I asked him what was the matter. And if he spent the entire day leaning out of that window.

" 'Yes, Jingle,' he said. 'I have to lean out. Do you know the smell of size? They use it a good deal in spring-cleaning. It's like glue and decayed fish. House is full of it. It hurts. Horribly. Damnably. I'm glad you've come, Jingle. I was to have had lunch in the housemaid's cupboard. But Mabel is an excellent housekeeper. Thorough.'

"Tried to cheer him up. Told him it would soon be over. And Summer would come.

" 'Ah,' he said, 'but if Summer don't! Size and spring-cleaning for ever and ever. Do you believe in eternal punishment?'

"Lunched at the 'Crown.' Stuffed a whiskey into him. Had six myself. No good. Said the cold beef tasted of size. Tried to switch him off; on to politics. Hadn't anything to say on that subject, because there was no room in his house in which there was enough space left to open a paper.

" 'Everything's put where everything else ought to be,' he said. 'Place for everything, and my foot in a pail of soapsuds. Did you know that Washo worked by itself? Have you tried Pingo for the paint? These pickles taste of Pingo. Had to do the walls of my study-room with it. Mabel made me. She's an excellent housekeeper. But the world does seem to be

entirely filled with dust, and the smell of decayed fish, don't you think?"

"Cheerful talk for a luncheon party, wasn't it? That man's on the verge of a breakdown. Don't like it at all. That wife of his is overdoing it. Shall look him up again next week. His mind's not right. He forgot to pay for the lunch. I suggested that I should do it, and he let me. Something seriously wrong there. Seriously. Have a drink."

4

Three days later Mr. Alfred Jingle resumed the subject.

"I told you things were bad with Sharper. They're worse. Much. I was there this morning. Enquired at his business place. They said their Mr. Sharper had gone out. Took a cab to Halfpenny Hole. Half-way there spotted Sharper sitting on a bank by the roadside with his bicycle beside him. Face like a tortured hyena. I got out and asked him what he was doing there.

"'Nowhere else to go,' he said. 'Spring-cleaning at home. And now they've started spring-cleaning at the office. All my dear little children piled up on the floor in the dust.'

"Told him I didn't know he had a family.

"'I mean my books. Lilac morocco. At my own expense. The firm wouldn't stick it. Decorators were sending out for more size when I left. I can't go back

there. Even if there were no spring-cleaning I couldn't go to Jawbones. Mabel gave me a list of things to buy in Dilborough. Glass soap and soft paper. I mean soft soap and glass paper. Lots of other things. I've forgotten to get any of them. All I can do is to sit here until the world comes to an end.'

"Well, I shoved him into my cab, and drove back to the 'Crown' at Dilborough. On the way I tried to buck him up a bit, but it was no use. He was absolutely broken-down. I asked him whose turn it was to pay for lunch, and he said he thought it was mine. Memory going. Well, I stuffed a drink into him and took nine myself. I can tell you I needed them. Then I got him to go back to business. Said he must save those lilac-bound children of his. Bright idea, what? Then I told him he could buy the things for his wife afterwards. He went like a lamb, too broken to resist. I confess I am worried about him. I must try to see him again if

5

a chance of doing so."

(And that shows you again how the number of a chapter-section may be used economically.)

CHAPTER X

LUKE knocked at the door of Mr. Diggle's room, and entered.

"I'm back," he said. "Been lunching with a man. Can I have a partnership?"

"Not to-day, Mr. Sharper," said Diggle. "You should be more reasonable. The whole office is more or less disorganized by the spring-cleaning. It seems to me that you try to make more trouble. You go out a great deal for a business man."

"I have to. Things for my wife, you know. Soft glass and paper soap. Things of that kind."

"I don't wish to hear about it. They will not be actually beginning on your room till Monday. It may be in some slight disorder, but that need not prevent you from going back there and getting on with your work. You have to write that full-page advertisement for the 'Church Times,' you remember."

He went on to his own room. He picked up the little booklets from the floor, dusted each one carefully, and wrapped it in white paper. As he was finishing the last a letter was brought in to him. The messenger was waiting for an answer. It was in Jona's handwriting.

"Darling Lukie," she wrote, "I can bear it no more. Take me away, please. Shall I come along to your office, or will you call for the goods? Jona."

He collapsed in a chair, his head buried in his hands.

Half-an-hour later the clerk came in to say that the messenger was still waiting.

"Sit down," said Luke.

The clerk sat down for half-an-hour. Luke still meditated. Then the office boy came in to fetch the clerk. It was necessary to do something, to decide at once. His promise to Mabel had been quite definite. He would bring back the spring-cleaning requisites on his bicycle that evening. There had been a sardonic cruelty in sending him to purchase the materials for his own torture. Still, he had promised.

Drawing a sheet of the firm's paper with the memo. head on it towards him, he wrote as follows:

"Jona: I can't get away to elope with you to-day. My wife won't let me. If you are still of the same mind on Saturday, the train I shall take for Brighton leaves Victoria at eleven."

He sent the letter down to the messenger, and then Diggle entered.

"Do you want to see me about the partnership?" said Sharper.

"No. I wanted to see you about the full-page advertisement for the 'Church Times.' Have you written it?"

"I've not, so to speak, written it."

"Well, Sharper, I've been talking to Dobson about you. I don't want to hurt your feelings, but our office space here is very limited. We are of the opinion that perhaps the amount of room you occupy here is intrinsically of more value than any services which you render to the business, or even the pleasure that your society naturally gives us. I don't know if you take my meaning."

"Do you want to turn me out?" said Sharper.

"Don't put it like that. You don't seem to know anything about business. You never do any work. You're playing about with Lady Tyburn in a way that'll bring scandal on the firm. But we don't want to turn you out. We don't want to do anything harsh. All we say is that we think it would be better for all concerned if you don't come here again. I think that will be all. Good evening, Mr. Sharper."

Luke went out and purchased the articles Mabel had asked him to buy. He then went to four different chemists, and at each one purchased a little oxalic acid, saying in each case that he wanted it to clean a straw hat.

With his bicycle laden considerably above the Plimsoll mark, he pedalled wearily homewards. He only fell off once, and it was a pity that this broke the bottle of turpentine, for he happened to be carrying it in the inside pocket of his coat.



CHAPTER XI

I

"We shall dine in the kitchen," said Mabel. "The dining-room and drawing-room are finished, but I am keeping them locked up until the workmen are out of the house, and all the mess is cleared away."

"You are an excellent housekeeper," said Luke. "Won't it be jolly to dine in the kitchen with Dot and Dash?"

"Ellen will sit in the garden while we are at dinner. Kate will wait on us as usual. I am sorry to say that a workman spilt a pail of whitewash in your room. Most of it went over your books. After dinner we will sit in the den."

"Mabel," said Luke, "when I told you of the suffering that would happen to me in consequence of Effie having the illegitimate child, which she never did, you said that it was all impossible. Part of it has come true. They don't want me to go to the business any more, and they've said so."

"Have they?" said Mabel. "Of course I knew they would. I've been expecting it for some time past. You see, you're not fitted for business. I don't know

that you're particularly fitted for anything. Well, when you talked to me about that Effie nonsense, I told you I'd arrange a little martyrdom for you if I could. Haven't I done it?"

"You have. In the interest of my sanity——"

"In the interests of your what?"

"In the interests of my sanity I shall go to Brighton for the week-end."

"Do," said Mabel. "You're terribly in the way here. It's about the first sensible idea you've had for this last year."

By half-past ten next morning he was on the platform at Victoria station. Would Jona be there?

Apparently not. He caught a distant glimpse of Lord Tyburn, but it was not with him that he was proposing to elope. Besides, Tyburn was accompanied by a somewhat highly painted and decorated young lady. Luke waited till the last moment, and waited in vain. He stepped into the train just as it was moving off.

2

At this point we will ask our Mr. Alfred Jingle to oblige again.

"Tell you what," he said to his artist friend. "I was wrong about Sharper again. I thought he'd reached the limit of human mess and martyrdom. He hadn't. He'd not got within a street of it. He's there now. Right up to the limit and leaning over the edge.

"Down at Brighton this week-end with my old

missus. Sitting out on the pier. Sunday morning. Listening to the band. Overture to 'William Tell.' Always is. Whenever I strike a band, it's 'William Tell' or 'Zampa.' Every time.

"Suddenly the missus says to me, 'Who's that old chap over there with a face like a turnip?'"

"I looked up. It was Luke Sharper. Looking ghastly. His hair was grey. His face was grey. Even his flannel trousers were grey. All grey and worn. I don't mean the trousers particularly. General effect, you know. Ears drooping down with no life or motion in them. I went up to him and asked him what brought him down to Brighton.

"'Go away,' he said. 'I'm a leper. I'm an outcast. I'm a pariah dog. Go before I bring misery on you.'"

"I told him I'd chance it, and asked him again what he was doing at Brighton.

"'I've eloped,' he said.

"'With whom?' I asked.

"'Nobody. She never turned up. That's not my fault. In the sight of Heaven we are all equal, and I'm an eloper. I'm a faithless hound. That's not all, Jingle. They've thrown me out of the business. And that's not all. I bought four packets of oxalic acid. I've put them down where Mabel is bound to see them. There's one on her pillow, one on the clock, one on the piano, and one on the mantelpiece. You see? I'm a murderer. Mabel will take the hint, and will commit suicide. That will upset Dot and Dash, and they will

commit suicide too. I only hope the man who spilt whitewash over my bookcase will commit suicide as well. Don't come and see me in the condemned cell. I don't want to see anybody any more. That's why I'm sitting on Brighton pier on a warm Sunday morning.'

" 'You've got this wrong, Sharper,' I said. 'I know your wife. She won't commit suicide because you've gone. She possibly might have done it if you had stopped. So your maids won't be upset, and they won't commit suicide either. And the painter's man who spilt the whitewash over your books will be enjoying the joke over his Sunday dinner. You're no good at the leper-and-pariah business. Come over and be introduced to my missus.'

" 'What you say might be true if I were a real man, but I have horrible doubts. I don't feel like a real man.'

" 'Come off it,' I said. 'What do you feel like, then?'

" 'I feel like a lot of tripe out of some damn-silly book.'

" 'Well, I took him over to the missus, and she got on the buzz. She's an energetic talkist. He never got time to say he was a leper once. Then some pals of hers came up to talk to her, and he and I escaped. I asked him what he was going to do. He said he was going back to Halfpenny Hole directly, in order to save the coroner's officer the trouble of fetching him.

Then he asked me to have a drink. We had three each. He rushed off to the station, and left me to pay. A man in that state is not fit to be alone. And it's not too safe for anybody who happens to be with him. I let him go."

3

It was half-past five when Luke got back to Jawbones again. He rang the bell. As the door was not opened, he rang again.

Then from the garden behind the house he heard the sound of voices and laughter. He recognized the laugh. It was Dot's. It was a full-bodied, fruity laugh. Luke walked round the house and into the garden to see what was happening.

On the lawn sat Dot, Dash, and the first and second footmen from Gallows. A table showed that tea, including bottled beer, had been served with some profusion. But the banquet was over and all four reclined in deck-chairs, smoking cigarettes.

Luke stared at them blankly. "Afraid I'm rather interrupting," he stammered.

"Well, old bean," said Dot. "You do come as a bit of a surprise. We'd not expected you before Tuesday. But our two gentlemen friends—Albert and Hector—I think you've met them—have to be back at their job at six. So we shan't keep you long. The kitchen door's open if you care to slip into the house and wait."

Luke's powerful mind made a rapid deduction. This

could never have happened if Mabel had not been powerless to prevent it. So Mabel must have . . . Yes, the oxalic acid.

"Can you tell me," he said in sepulchral tones, "where I shall find the body of my poor wife?"

"Afraid I can't," said Dot. Her laughter jarred on him.

"Let us," he said, "be reverent. When did she die?"

Here Dash, under the pink parasol, broke in, "But she's alive. And I'll bet she's a good deal livelier than she's been for years past. I helped her pack, and it was some trousseau. The old girl's done a bunk. See? Skipped it with a gentleman friend of hers."

"You might have mentioned that before," said Luke, aggrieved. "I quite thought that something was the matter."

"Well, she's left a letter for you in your almost-silver cigarette case. You'll find it in the bath-room, balanced on the hot-water tap. You run along and read it. You're the least little bit in the way at this tea party."

4

Seated on the edge of the bath, Luke read as follows:

"You could always see every point of view except one, and that was your wife's.

"Once or twice the sting of your jelly-fish of a conscience made you try to be nice to me. There are words and acts from a man to a woman which may be

lovely to the woman if they come spontaneously and naturally. If they are produced as by a force-pump, they are an insult. If you tried to hide the pump, it was a poor effort.

"When you took up with that Tyburn minx, I thought that you had realized the situation, that you saw that I found life with you detestable and intolerable, and that you meant to give me a chance to divorce you. I employed a private detective with what I had saved out of the house-money, and had you watched. The detective reported that there was nothing good enough—or bad enough—for the High Court, and that the woman seemed to be doing most of the work.

"So as the mixture of cowardice and selfishness which you call your conscience would not let you give me a chance to divorce you, I determined to make you divorce me. The first thing to do was to get you out of the way. It is so trying and undignified to elope if a husband is looking on, and possibly interfering. So I adopted a system of intensive spring-cleaning. I don't think I left out anything which could inconvenience and annoy you. It went on and on. No house has been spring-cleaned like this since the world began. I fancy it was the whitewash over your books that finally shunted you. You left in the early morning. I packed at leisure and left in the evening, taking with me a gentleman who financed that great success, Doom Dagshaw's Mammoth Circus.

"As he is not in the book, I may mention that he is

a Mr. Nathan Samuel. But no matter. A nose by any other name would smell as efficiently. He is a true Christian with no fault except his love for me.

"The necessary particulars will be sent to your solicitors, and I hope you will then get busy.

"Ta-ta, old crock. Yours, Mabel."

"P.S.—You shouldn't leave oxalic acid about like that. Don't you know it's a poison? I've hidden it underneath your dress-shirts, in case of accidents."

Luke put the letter down. There was a step outside the door and Dot entered.

"Thought I should find you here," said Dot. "Everything all right?"

"Couldn't be better. But why did she leave the letter on the hot-water tap?"

"Oh, that was just a little joke of hers. She said you always got into any hot water that might be going about, and so you'd be sure to find it there."

"Do you see what this means, Dot? It means that in future we can play at boats without any fear of interruption."

"M'yes," said Dot. "It's not the very devil of a game, is it? Been over the house yet? I must say it does look nice, now all the cleaning and decorating's finished. Albert and Hector both noticed it."

"Yes, very nice. I suppose you and Dash would like to be getting dinner for me."

"That's what we're panting after. But it can't be done, because there's nothing to eat. At least, there's

nothing for you. Besides, after this afternoon we are both emotionally worn-out. And that's not all. Albert and Hector brought us a bit of news from Gallows. Just you take my tip and ask no questions. You take the train into Dilborough and dine at the 'Crown.' You might—I don't say you will, but you might—get a bit of a surprise. If you hurry you'll catch the 7.5."

Luke thrust his wife's letter into his pocket, and hurried.

5

"No," said the sad-eyed waiter, in reply to Luke's enquiry. "No, we do not serve the dinner on Sunday night. In Dilborough Sunday night, there is what you call, nothing doing. You can have a nice chop."

"I hate chops," said Luke moodily. "All right, get me a chop."

"The lady who stay here, she have a chop too. She also say she hate chops. You have to wait a little time perhaps, because the chef is out Sunday evening. You wait in the drawing-room. It is very nice. Very comfortable. There is a newspaper of last Friday evening."

Luke submitted and entered the fly-haunted drawing-room. He sat down with his head in his hands. Mabel's letter had been characteristically unlike her. Her letters were never in the least bit like herself. That was perhaps their only attraction. It was only in the

postscript that he seemed actually to hear her speak.

"Poor Nathan Samuel!" he said to himself. "Poor Moses Nathan Modecai Samuel!"

The door opened and Jona came in, clad in a betrayed-heroine tea-gown. She looked beautiful but tragic.

"Jona," he cried, springing to his feet.

She shrank back, covering her face with her hands.

"Don't speak to me," she said. "Don't come near me. I'm a leper, a pariah, and an outcast."

"Oh, look here, hang it all, you can't, you know. That's mine. If there's any lepering to be done, I do that. Outcast? How do you mean outcast?"

"Haven't you heard?" she said.

"No," said Luke. "Come and sit on my knee, and tell me all your troubles."

"I oughtn't," she said, but she did.

"You didn't turn up at Victoria yesterday. Couldn't you leave your husband?"

"I couldn't," she said. "I couldn't, because I've not got a husband. And have never had a husband. One of Bill's previous wives started to make a fuss, and he made a clean breast of it to me. He'd married in two different names before he married me, and both wives are still living. He went to Brighton on Saturday to marry one more. Because he wants to get his picture, as the peer convicted of trigamy, on the back page of the 'Daily Mail,' with the fourth wife inset. So you see what has happened. It was my fault, but

that's how I come to be in the pariah class. Can you bear me any longer?"

"Yes," said Luke, "you're not heavy."

And then the sad-eyed waiter came in without knocking, and they broke away.

"I beg pardon," said the waiter. "Perhaps I interrupt a little. I come to say the chops is ready. Shall I put the two places close together?"

"Very close together," said Luke.

6

They entered the dining-room.

"You needn't remain," said Luke to the waiter. "We'll help ourselves."

"Ver' good," said the waiter. "I understand. I am since three years of experience in the week-end business. I come when you ring—not before."

Luke and Jona talked together earnestly for an hour. Then they remembered they had been intending to dine. Luke removed the cover from the dish and looked at two large melancholy chops, frozen hard.

"Can we?" said Luke.

"Not in this life," said Jona. "Get it removed."

Luke produced a visiting-card, and wrote on the back of it: "A Present for a Good Dog. From Jona and Lukie!" He put the card in the dish and replaced the cover. Then he investigated the wine list, rang the bell, and ordered champagne and dry biscuits to be put in the drawing-room.

(The reader is requested to look out. Once more the numbers of the section will be used as a part of the sections. The price of paper is still very high.)

"Just imagine," said Luke. "Only this morning I was convinced that life was hell. Absolute hell."

"And now?" asked Jona, shyly.

"Now I know that it's

7."

he said, and kissed her.

Luke walked back. It was some time in the small hours that he entered his house burglariously by forcing open the window of a room that had once been called a den.

As he sat at breakfast the next morning, Dot said: "Hope they gave you a good dinner at the 'Crown' last night."

"I don't know," he said. "I don't really remember what we

8."

"All love and honey, what?" suggested Dot.

"Dot," said Luke, "don't be asi-

9."

"Oh, that's all right," said Dot. "You don't need to pay any at-

10.

tion to my chaff."

EPILOGUE

LUKE sold Jawbones for a much higher price than he had expected.

"You see," the agent explained, "the place is in such a perfect condition. Everything up to the mark. Absolutely spotless."

"Yes," said Luke. "Mrs. Sharper was an excellent housekeeper. I've always said so."

Luke had intended to pay Dot and Dash board-wages until he was free to marry Jona, and then to take them into his service again. But this was not to be.

"Sorry," said Dot, "but it won't do. Of course we wish you every happiness, and no doubt in time you'll get used to not suffering so much, and not being misunderstood so frequent. But me and Dash has been brought up respectable, and respectable we shall remain. I've no doubt your good lady thought it was all right, and went to church with him, and signed the book and all that. But facts are facts, and the fact is that for years and years she was living the life of open sin with that Lord Tyburn. No, we couldn't stick it. Besides, I'm going to marry Hector to take entire charge of a small flat, one in family, no children or washing, every Sunday, and frequent outings. And my sister's doing the same with Albert. All the same, here's luck."

Our friend, Mr. Alfred Jingle, solicitor, arranged everything splendidly. He prevented Luke from inserting, in a moment of enthusiasm, an advertisement under the Fashionable Intelligence in the daily press that a divorce had been arranged and would shortly take place, between Luke Sharper, Esq., formerly of Jawbones, Halfpenny Hole, and Mabel, his wife. The case was undefended, and the day after the decree was made absolute Luke married Jona.

Nor did Mr. Alfred Jingle forget, when he made out his bill of costs, to include in his out-of-pocket expenses, the cost of certain luncheons and drinks which Mr. Sharper would, no doubt, have defrayed had he not at that time been in a condition of absent-mindedness induced by martyrdom.

Not only did Lord Tyburn succeed in getting his photograph on to the back page of the "Daily Mail." There was also another photograph of the four ladies whom he had married, reading from left to right. He did everything well.

THE END

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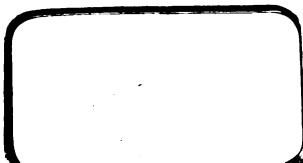
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